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Christopher Braider, *The Matter of Mind: Reason and Experience in the Age of Descartes*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012. xii + 339 pages. Plates, figures, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781442643482.

Review by April G. Shelford, American University.

Christopher Braider's *The Matter of Mind* is an ambitious study that seeks to examine in a radically new way the "so-called Cartesian order of the French classical age" (p. 33): that is, as centrally engaged with—and ultimately opposed to—Descartes's conception of a disembodied mind. The interpretative stakes are high, according to Braider, because Cartesian rationality, as the foundation of the modern autonomous self, "is said to have inaugurated a new era grounded in reason's critical and instrumental detachment both from physical nature and from the cultural allegiances inherited from the past" (p. 3). He intends his readings of the works of several canonical authors and one painter—Mersenne's edition of Descartes's *Meditations* (1641), Poussin's *Judgment of Solomon* (1649), Corneille's *Medée* (1634), Molière's *Sganarelle* (1660), Pascal's apologetics, and Boileau-Despréaux's *L'Équivoque* (c. 1705)—to demonstrate that, for these seventeenth-century luminaries, mind was always "materialized," always entangled in body. Though grounded in literature, Braider writes in an interdisciplinary mode, shifting as needed from thorny epistemological questions to, for example, issues of print production. Allergic both to "Whiggism" and post-modernism, he earnestly desires to tell us something "true" while admitting that what he has to say is far indeed from what his authors "imagined they were doing" (p. 33).

Braider particularly admires Montaigne and gives us a very sensitive (and admirable) reading of his essay on experience (pp. 21-27). This is essential introductory material as the seventeenth-century understandings of "experience" figure significantly in Braider's larger interpretation: we have experience as human beings precisely *because* of the mingling of matter and mind. His first chapter on Mersenne's edition of Descartes's *Meditations* develops these points: to get from the in-here to the out-there, from me, the thinking I, to those other (presumably) thinking I's, Descartes depended on the materiality of print, which could only take spark in others' minds through the sensory, material faculty of sight. Worse, because Mersenne embedded the *Meditations* in a matrix of others' objections, Descartes's "private self-colloquy on which the philosopher's reputation as author of the 'modern subject' rests had turned into a three-ring circus" (p. 43), and "thought's presumed material envelope is in the end indiscernible from thought itself" (p. 48).

The next chapter on Poussin's *Judgment of Solomon* is typically dense and wide ranging. It also has an explicit political dimension because the self under discussion, Solomon, is quite literally "sovereign." But it essentially replicates and parallels points raised in the first chapter. Thus, Braider finds correlates for the paper and type of the printed book in the "material envelope" of an artist's pigments. As Descartes ultimately (if reluctantly) required dialogue, so the sovereign self, whether the Solomon of the Old Testament or Poussin himself in self-portraits for friends and patrons, required the viewer for completion. Materiality did not *mediate* self; it *made* self. Braider could have emphasized more Poussin's connection with neo-Stoicism—a salutary reminder that one did not need Descartes to be "rational," thus a "philosophic painter," in the seventeenth century. Also, given new life by the horrors of the religious wars, it grounded an "autonomous" individual (if not *the* modern autonomous individual)

because of the Stoic's ability to control, if not his circumstances, then what he thought and felt about them (theoretically, at least).

The chapter on Corneille's *Medée* is, to my mind, the most exciting, even exhilarating chapter in the book. Braider graces this chapter with extended, well-chosen, and astutely interpreted quotations. Ultimately, in Medea's heroic, savage performance of self, Braider finds Corneille's confident assertion of creative autonomy in joyful defiance of "his rivals' high-minded political moralizing" (p. 129) and the "nascent classical order" (p. 143). His reading also prompted me to wonder whether Medea, however perverse, could be construed as much a "noble savage" as a "savage other," that is, possessed of a distinctive autonomy because nobility tolerated no taint of dependence. But Braider's gesture at chapter's end towards *les cartésiennes* who, with their "novelist sisters drew inspiration from the gendered bodies that, in marginalizing them, granted the Archimedean point of leverage needed to shift the world from place" (p. 148), is a misstep. *Les cartésiennes* delighted in Descartes's disembodied mind precisely because, ungendered, it gave women a sound, philosophical foundation on which to assert an intellectual capacity equal to men's. This was a difficult, if not impossible project within prevailing paradigms, whether religious or medical.

Braider felicitously suggests that Molière's comedies explored experience by essentially running a series of moral experiments on unsuspecting, deluded, and vainglorious human beings. Generally speaking, though, his chapter on *Sganarelle* buckles under the weight of the intellectual work he wants it to do: "The pertinacity with which...Molière's play challenges the dualist underpinnings of classical representation leads to still wider issues bearing on the nature of royal imagery, on the image's ambiguous place in contemporary logic, and on its still more ambiguous role in early modern theology, an intellectual discipline to which, despite the era's growing secularism, all others remained subordinate" (p. 156). At two key points, his reasoning appears strained: where he collapses the conceptual gap "between things and pictures" and "between bodies and minds" (p. 136), and where he makes Mme Sganarelle an "idolatress" on the basis of her captivation with a portrait (p. 165). His connection of the "logicians' faith in the special clarity and distinctness of the portrait" to the Cartesian ego and its self-referential definition of truth also seems forced, more semantic than real (p. 169).

Braider moves more securely into the theological sphere in his next chapter on Pascal. Ranging widely, it returns to Montaigne's essay on experience and focuses on Pascal's unfinished fragment on "the machine." The Jansenist relationship to Descartes and Cartesianism was complex, of course, with apologists such as Antoine Arnauld welcoming his proof of the existence of God. But Pascal was no conventional Jansenist (if such ever existed). Besides, one could appropriate Cartesian proofs for their apologetic utility while regarding the philosopher himself as "a monster of demonic pride" (p. 176). Playing Pascal and Descartes off each other, Braider brings to light two varieties of "self," neither of which were worth having: the Christian self, whose sinful essence, sunk in matter, destined it for eternal perdition; and the "purely rational subject that modern science demands [and which is] just as empty of humanity as the natural phenomena his or her experiments exhibit" (p. 191). The former was all-too-human and inevitable; the latter, inhuman and impossible.

Braider concludes his book with an extended consideration of Boileau-Despréaux's *Sur l'équivoque*, the twelfth and final poem in a series of satires that were essentially literary criticism. Thanks to Boileau's association with the Jansenists, Braider can move effortlessly from Pascal and his themes of fallen human nature and the corrupted self. Here, the inherent ambiguity of language condemns humanity to an unending history of "words [*mots*] without end" precipitating "evils [*maux*] without end" (a very nice pun of Braider's discovery). But Boileau is even more important for Braider as the end of a cultural moment. "Composed in the early years of the eighteenth century..., Satire XII appears just when the classical ethos of which Boileau is the fossilized epitome is being definitively displaced by the 'modern' culture championed by his last great literary enemy, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle" (p. 217). Thus,

the poem becomes a valiant, if somewhat pathetic attempt to settle scores with old and diverse enemies, Jesuits and *précieuses* alike, while making a claim on posterity's attention.

Unfortunately, Braider's final chapter did not assuage my discomfort with the book's overall conceptual frame and ambition: "to topple a tenacious idol to which most accounts of the early modern West pay homage. It is by way of being an axiom of early modern literary and cultural studies that the crucial turning point in Western modernity was the advent of the so-called modern subject, the sovereign rational mind personified by René Descartes" (p. 3). Ringing pronouncements like these recur frequently (e.g., pp. 66-67, 125, 153), but at whom are these barbs aimed? Braider names the usual suspects: Jonathan Israel and Desmond Clarke, for example, who "[applaud the Cartesian sovereign rational mind] as the spring of self-determining freedom," versus Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault, who "lament [it] as the fount of alienated enslavement" (p. 3). This feels tired, and, whatever their scholarly sins, none of these scholars deserves such dismissive caricature. Also, while it is good to be reminded that Cartesianism did not, like some cultural tsunami, sweep all before it, Cartesianism itself was no more monolithic than French classicism (apologies for the mixed metaphors!). Descartes's diverse adepts appropriated his ideas diversely--and they even included some schismatics. Scholars have been engaged in exploring this rich intellectual and cultural territory for some time. As J. B. Shank wrote here in 2003, "Not so long ago, *cogito ergo sum* was considered the sacred bedrock of human rationality itself. Similarly, Descartes's writings were viewed un-self-consciously as the founding revelation of modern thought, even of modernity *tout court*. Yet the owl of Minerva has flown. What was once natural, overdetermined, and self-evident has now become historical, contingent, and in need of explanation." [1] Shank went on to ably review several works on the reception of Descartes and Cartesianism published in 2001 and 2002, noting especially those of scholars like Thomas Lennon.

Braider's *The Matter of Mind* nevertheless compels us to look anew at these canonical authors by asking new questions of them and by putting them into dialogue with a most significant contemporary in original ways. Ultimately, it reinforces the impression I took away from a recent performance of Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*: the "classic" French seventeenth century still has much to teach us about the construction (and delusion?) of self and what being a diversely comprised being means for "being" human.

NOTE

[1] See J. B. Shank's review of François Azouvi, *Descartes et la France: Histoire d'une passion nationale*; Tad M. Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes*; Stéphane Van Damme, *Descartes: Essai d'histoire culturelle d'une grandeur philosophique*; Richard A. Watson, *Cogito, Ergo, Sum: The Life of René Descartes* in *H-France Review* 3(May 2003), No. 46. Also see my review of Fred Ablondi's *Gerald de Cordemoy: Atomist, Occasionalist, Cartesian* in *H-France Review* 6(December 2006), No. 152.

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